

ISRAEL

STUDIES IN ZIONISM AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL
HISTORY, SOCIETY, CULTURE

The Chaim Weizmann Institute for the Study of Zionism and Israel was set up in 1962 at Tel Aviv University through the initiative and with the assistance of the Executive of the World Zionist Organization, with the aim of furthering the research and the teaching of the history of the Zionist idea, the Zionist movement and the Land of Israel in modern times.

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Amos Oz's A Tale of Love and Darkness

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Summaries

Gershon Shaked

A Monument to the Fathers, a Beacon to the Sons:
Oz's Autobiography in Light of the Autobiographies
by Gouri, Kaniuk and Applefeld

In *A Tale of Love and Darkness* Amos Oz tries to answer the question of his origins. His initial answer is that he is the son and grandson of East European Revisionists and Labor movement pioneers; his second answer is that he is the offspring of Zionist history, into which he was born, which left its stamp on him and from which he cannot, and does not wish to, escape. Haim Gouri is the offspring of the Israeli ethos and landscape; Aharon Applefeld cannot evade his formative years during the Holocaust; Yoram Kaniuk is unable to ignore two historical Jewish experiences: the bond to the European world and the War of Independence. Although Amos Oz lived through dramatic events in the State of Israel, he is also heir to major chapters of Jewish history in the Diaspora. He lived his Israeliness with all his being as a child in besieged Jerusalem, and his Jewishness was handed down to him in intensified form by his parents, their parents and his uncle in Talpiot, Professor Joseph Klausner, who became a family symbol in his own lifetime. Oz identified with these two modern narratives of the Jewish experience and has blended them emotionally and intellectually. Although he regards himself as exceptional in his generation, more than most of his contemporaries he has succeeded in depicting the Israeli-Jewish mix that is apparently characteristic of the majority of Jews in the country. In this requiem for his father and his mother, which forms the core of his autobiography, the narrator takes leave of his forefathers and faces history alone as one who will henceforth stamp his own identity on his biological and spiritual offspring.

Dan Laor

In the Regions of Memory: Biography, Ideology and Narrative in
the Writing of Amos Oz

An important component of *A Tale of Love and Darkness* is the detailed history of the narrator's family, on both his father's and his mother's side, which takes him back into the regions of memory, and to some unknown territories in Eastern Europe (cities like Grodno, Odessa, Rowno and Vilna). This is a very significant move, particularly in the light of Oz's decision (though at a very young age) to leave his father's home, join a kibbutz, and adopt the name "Oz" instead of his family name "Klausner." After presenting the pattern of each genealogy included in this book and revealing their various sources, the article argues that Oz's individual quest for the "roots" of his

family should be taken as a symbolic expression of a new solidarity between the Israeli native son, the Sabra, and the previously suppressed ancestral world of the Jewish Diaspora.

Mordechai Bar-On

Oz in Divided Jerusalem

From May 1948 until June 1967 Jerusalem was a divided city. Its eastern suburbs were controlled by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and its western parts by the State of Israel. The city was cut across by barbed wire, ugly concrete walls and minefields. For Israelis, life in divided Jerusalem, surrounded on three sides by the “enemy,” was a unique experience of tension, longing and seclusion. Amos Oz, who was born in Jerusalem, has given poignant expression to this experience in many of his novels and essays. He spent five formative years, between the ages of ten and fifteen (1948–1954), in the divided city, and returned in the early 1960s as a student at the Hebrew University. Two of his early works (*My Michael* and *The Hill of Evil Counsel*) reflect his memories of that period. The last section of his new autobiography, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, and a number of Oz’s essays enable us to establish in greater detail the way the experience of living in the divided city impacted his visions and images, his conception of the Arab “other,” the contradiction between the Jewish historic and collective memories he shares and the political realities of the city, and so forth. When Oz visited the walled part of the city at the end of the Six Day War, he discovered that the Jerusalem he so much loved, the Jerusalem of his yearnings, was a “strange city.” This estrangement surprised him but can be easily traced back to those nineteen years in which the Old City of Jerusalem lay behind barbed wire and mines.

Iris Milner

A Family Tale

The Myth of Family in *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and in Amos Oz’s Early Works

Amos Oz’s autobiographical novel is, among other things, an attempt to abandon the collective social framework within which the “new Jew” tended to define himself, and replace it with a family framework, rooted in the family’s places of origin in the Diaspora. As such, it is an attempt both to reinforce the concept of the family as the basic social unit (as opposed to the superiority attributed to the public sphere by the Zionist ideology) and to re-establish a severed family genealogy. However, as a family novel, it also exposes the destructive forces working to deconstruct the popular myth of the family as an ultimate territory of unconditional acceptance, love and support. The article demonstrates that these opposing family dynamics are a major theme of both the autobiographical novel and the novels and short stories Oz published during the first

decade of his career as a writer. On the basis of the more recent work, it offers a reading of Oz's early prose as centering on the problematic inherent to the family as a social unit designed to tame human drives and produce socialization.

Robert Alter

The Consecration of the Writer and the Death of the Mother in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*

A Tale of Love and Darkness is in several ways the richest of Oz's books. It creates a broad historical panorama as well as a personal one, and it is alternately poignant, wrenching, amusing and downright funny. Because it is anecdotal, associative and sometimes even repetitive, it may at first seem loosely organized, but in fact it has a great deal of imaginative coherence through the linkage it makes between two seemingly disparate themes—the small child's discovery of his future vocation as an artist and the suicide of the mother. A spectacular central scene roughly in the middle of the book uses certain motifs, which then recur in the evocation of the mother's suicide with which the book concludes. Telling the painful truth, including the truth of his mother's death, defines the writer's sense of vocation.

Nitza Ben-Dov

Sandals, Shoes and Sex: Absence, Eros and Passion in the Works of Amos Oz

A mother abandons her child in mysterious circumstances. The abandoned child turns out to be good looking and talented and becomes an object of attraction and desire, but the sorrow of being forsaken stays forever in his heart, shaping his personality and guiding his destiny. This pattern is typical of the works of Amos Oz and recurs again and again from his first novel, *Another Place* (1966), to his most recent book, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (2002). This essay shows how, from one novel to another, Oz has gradually moved away from fiction toward factual narrative.

The motif of the mother deserting her child has appeared throughout his literary career in various versions—hallucinatory plots, strange narrators, and differing points of view. In this most recent autobiographical work, this story is told by an older Amos Oz, who this time narrates it from the point of view of a mature author. In this "real story" all the disguises appear to have been dropped and all the masks removed. On the face of it, this is all about exposure and stripping down, yet there are still surprises about the mother's open-hidden status in her son's emotional life. Removing the masks, we discover at the end, turns out to be nothing more than a way of adopting a new disguise. In fact, Amos Oz creates a unique case study for the well-known Oedipus model.

Amia Lieblich

“Hiding away the Sofa”: Some Facets of Amos Oz’s Autobiography

The article first examines some of the factors that normally lead writers to compose an autobiography: the need to remember, the need to find meaning in one’s life, the wish to know and master the past, to come to terms with the past and one’s family of origin, to perform an act of forgiveness or of revenge, and so on. Each of these factors is evaluated in the context of *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. The second part of the article assembles Oz’s own reflections on the motivation for his writing in general, and for this autobiographical project in particular. Oz’s views on the issue of truth and fiction in autobiography as it applies both to writers and readers is presented in the last section of the article.

Dina Porat

“There was Fear in Jerusalem” The Holocaust and Anti-Semitism in Amos Oz’s *A Tale of Love and Darkness*

Twice in this book Oz suggests a connection between the Holocaust and his mother’s death. In the middle of the book, when he describes her disappointment with her life in Jerusalem of the early 1950s, he emphasizes that by that time she already knew of the murder of all her relatives and classmates; and towards the end he describes his father frantically throwing away every article of her belongings, while he, the son, watches him, terrified, much as Christian neighbors watched the Germans sending away the Jews. This article suggests an explanation for this connection, based on Oz’s many poignant references to the prewar anti-Semitism that drove his family to the Land of Israel; to the fear of a German invasion in Palestine during the war; and to the anxieties regarding the Jewish future in general. These are all issues that led Oz, son and grandson of those who were unwanted elsewhere, to espouse Zionism as a basic means of survival.

Nissim Calderon

Amos Oz and the “Poverty of Matter”

Amos Oz, who grew up in a right-wing Revisionist home in Jerusalem, abandoned it at the age of 15 and exchanged it for a left-wing socialist home on a kibbutz. Not only did Oz adopt a different political outlook, but his conduct and literary and publicistic writing were influenced by an aesthetics characteristic of the Labor movement. With reference to Israeli art, Sara Breitberg-Semel has called these aesthetics “the poverty of

matter.” This is an “inner code” of Israeli culture that eschews colorfulness, refuses to paint seductive pictures, tends toward reserve in expressing emotions, prefers a distant, intellectual approach, has a somewhat skeptical attitude to the material world and shies away from all idealizations, both in and outside art. In his literary work, as opposed to his political path, Oz attempted, in convoluted and multifaceted ways, to blend the opposing elements of his life, giving expression both to the spirit of Zionist Socialism and to secular, anti-mystical Revisionism. His writings contain an inner contradiction, manifesting his simultaneous struggle with his attraction to the romance of the metaphor and with the poverty of matter that relinquished the dream of the metaphor.

Anita Shapira

The “Zionist Narrative” of Amos Oz

A turbulent public debate took place in Israel in the 1990s, centering on a harsh critique of the deeds and misdeeds of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel, and even questioning the legitimacy of their existence. Since his youth, Amos Oz has been one of the fiercest critics of the various governments of Israel, especially with regard to the quest for peace with the Arabs. Nonetheless, he has never been a post-Zionist. This article argues that *A Tale of Love and Darkness* can be seen as a response to the post-Zionist arguments. In this book Oz returns to, and reinforces, the classical Zionist narrative. He narrates the Zionist story through the private case of his family, the Klausner family. The book reflects the author’s sense of disappointment and frustration caused by the Palestinians’ return to violence. At the same time Oz makes peace with the past, both private and public, finding in it justification and consolation, and even hope for the future.

Yigal Schwartz

“You Entered an Enchanted Palace and Released It from the Spell”: *A Tale of Love and Darkness* as a Cult-Novel

A Tale of Love and Darkness was published in January 2002 and became an overnight bestseller. Soon after publication, the author received some 400 letters from readers eager to share their response to the work. This paper is an attempt to understand the readers’ unprecedented response to Amos Oz’s novel, through analysis of the letters. The main argument is that it was a highly specific group of readers—which includes the letter writers—who embraced the work and essentially turned it into a cult-novel. The first part of this article presents the various cultic practices of the target audience both as readers (of the novel) and writers (of the letters). The second part explores the specific socio-cultural background that inspired, and perhaps even created, or at the very least magnified, the overwhelming response to this novel.

Nurith Gertz

His Landscapes and My Landscapes: A Personal View

Beyond Amos Oz's heroes' dreams of faraway regions lies a yearning for a utopia of wholeness and totality that they inherited or adopted from the first pioneers in Palestine. This is a yearning for the impossible fusion between universal and national justice, for the "kingdom of heaven" that will be established here and now. *A Tale of Love and Darkness* conducts an archaeological excavation into the depths of Jewish history, thereby eliding the local history of the Land of Israel and the utopian project woven within it. This is the project that Hanna, Guillaume of Touron and Shraga, the heroes of *My Michael*, *Crusade* and *Late Love*, sought in the plains of Siberia, in Pascal's silent spaces, or in celestial Jerusalem. This is the project that the elderly narrator seeks throughout Jewish history in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, while eliding its existence in Israeli history.